

# How resilient is the food supply in times of crisis?

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BlackRock Ideas Exchange Netherlands

As part of the BlackRock Ideas Exchange series, meetings with experts who explore big ideas and questions that occupy society today, the first Dutch edition focused on the state and future of food security. This document summarizes the event. [You can watch the entire event here.](#)



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## Trends in food security

While there has been significant progress in food production and hunger reduction worldwide over the past thirty years, this trend seems to have unfortunately been broken in the last five years. The experts mention several background trends playing a role in this. For example, the world's population continues to grow, which means that we will have to produce more food in the next forty years than in the past 8,000 years. This is at odds with the emission reduction needed to halt climate change, while food security is increasingly under pressure due to growing droughts and floods. Additionally, the war in Ukraine played a role, affecting 6% of the world's direct food supply. This not only concerns the loss of production from Ukraine, but the global increase in the price of fertilizer – for which gas is an important input – may also lead to disappointing production and higher food prices in the coming period.

At the moment, we are essentially stumbling from crisis to crisis. Our food supply system has become increasingly focused on efficiency, which has come at the expense of the system's resilience. The risk is that we become too dependent on a limited number of crops or agricultural areas. The underlying trend is that the climate challenge and biodiversity need to be addressed in the long term.

## Food security: Structural problem or solvable challenge?

The number of people suffering from hunger continues to increase, and we must ask ourselves whether we can accept this as a world. In addition, climate change is a significant challenge that requires adaptation and mitigation. Issues like overconsumption and food waste are other problems that call for a solution. Increasing geopolitical tensions surrounding ownership and distribution of food present an obstacle, increasingly hindering a constructive approach.

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**As a result of the war in Ukraine, the debate in Europe has taken a huge swing. The desire to become 'food independent' is clearly visible in this context.”**

**Louise van Schaik**, Head of Unit EU & Global Affairs, Clingendael Institute

To what extent, however, have we reached a fundamental tipping point? Thomas Malthus already warned of an unsustainable situation at the end of the nineteenth century, and the disaster scenario that the Club of Rome outlined fifty years ago never came to pass.

The experts' response was that there are now indeed a number of more fundamental problems. First, it is questionable whether we can be satisfied with the current situation, given that the number of people suffering from hunger has increased significantly in recent years. Second, climate change is not a temporary but a structural factor that will increasingly impact food production. The influence of escalating geopolitical tensions also seems to be here to stay. This not only concerns the war in Ukraine: the risk of block formation that could disrupt food trade is lurking, but on the other hand, a lack of food security can also lead to political instability in countries, as we saw during the 'Arab Spring' of 2010-2012.

**“We need to produce more food in the next forty years than we have done in the past 8,000 years, while emissions must be significantly reduced.”**

**Leo den Hartog**, former R&D director, Nutreco en professor, Wageningen University & Research

### **Thinking about concrete solutions?**

This somewhat gloomy picture naturally raises the question of whether there are also solutions. The experts did not remain silent on this issue. For instance, much can be expected from knowledge transfer and innovation in agriculture, where the Netherlands – as an agricultural knowledge institute – can play an important role.

In addition, it was advised to move away from the 'one size fits all approach', which currently seems central. Regional circumstances call for a local approach, in which differentiation in food and consumption can make the food system resilient again. Building local resilience is also an important challenge, whereas building higher walls in Europe is not a solution.

Moreover, there is much to gain if we can reduce existing imbalances in the world. In many parts of the world, we see obesity, while there is hunger elsewhere. The fact that a significant portion of our food production in the West is thrown away indicates that there is still much to gain in terms of efficiency. There also needs to be a better mechanism for pricing the underlying costs of pollution so that the negative external impact of pollution is better reflected in the economy.

**“The climate crisis will ensure that certain products in certain places in the world can no longer be produced, or be produced less effectively or less efficiently, while others can be produced more effectively.”**

**Marcel van Nijnatten**, Coordinator Food Security Unit, Ministry of Agriculture and food quality

### **The positive note**

When asked if we will be better off in terms of food security in about 10 years, opinions vary. The more optimistic view is that we will be able to tackle the problems in the next 10 years as well. History has shown that humanity—especially in the long run—is inventive and resilient. Having said that, climate change and the increasing polarization of geopolitical relations do indeed pose significant challenges that we will need to find appropriate solutions for in the next ten years. In that regard, the signal is certainly not entirely green.

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